

Amazon's 'Honey Boy' is an exercise in artful introspection

Shia LaBeouf reflects on child stardom

By ETHAN RICE



Otis Lort (Jupe) and his father James (Lebouf) try to work through their complex relationship in "Honey Boy"

The journey of child stars in Hollywood is tragically rife with extremely public pitfalls that plague many who are thrust into the global spotlight from a young age.

Amazon Prime's original feature release, "Honey Boy," tells one such story. Specifically, it is a dramatized imagining of the life of Shia LaBeouf, written by the actor himself during his time in rehab following wide media coverage of his struggles with anger and substance abuse.

LaBeouf's script has now become a movie, directed by Alma Har'el and starring LaBeouf as James Lort, a fictionalized depiction of his father. It is a neon-soaked journey, sometimes funny, sometimes uplifting and frequently painful.

To say painful is not to mean that it hurts to watch. Catharsis can hurt. Even without being in the loop on LaBeouf's own life, it is clear that this is a raw, personal work of art. The viewer has been shuffled into the small, claustrophobic world of the protagonist's mind, with no room to turn away from the drama unfolding before them. As the tragically broken humans in this world crash into each other again and again, the pain resonates.

In 2005, Otis Lort (Lucas Hedges) is a star of action movies whose life off set seems every bit as intense as the characters he plays, an endless cycle of recklessness, alcohol and fury. After a car crash and drunken brawl with the police lands him in a posh rehab clinic, Otis's doctors suspect PTSD — a diagnosis he rejects — leading his mind to wander back in time.

In 1995, where the bulk of the movie takes place, young Otis is played by the revelatory Noah Jupe — a child star carted from set to set by his father, James (LaBeouf), a former rodeo clown and recovered alcoholic whose past transgressions have left his life in shambles. He is left struggling to play paternal to a son who pays him to be a butler. As their two lives roll on in dramatically different directions, the two Lorts reach out to each other as if trying to catch one of the rolled socks they use to practice juggling, but always seem to miss.

LaBeouf's difficult script is masterfully breathed to life by Har'el, who displays the world through a glaring, dreamlike lens of bright colored lights, slow-moving shots and messenger hens that strut aimlessly into frame as haunting specters of Otis's past and James's failed dreams in the form of his old 'partner,' Henrietta the Daredevil Chicken.

Har'el's direction in hand with Natasha Braier's cinematography takes a deliberately artistic approach, which leaves a lasting impression long after the credits have faded. (Braier's work here earned her the "Vision and Craft Award" at Sundance.)

In the end, we leave young Otis and James walking a fine balance between love and indifference, compassion and cruelty, hope and despair. As for Otis in 2005, he seems to find peace, somehow. Neither script nor direction seeks to cast stones or lay blame for the issues at hand. They simply ask us to ride along with two broken souls and try to understand.

It isn't a perfect story. The 2005 scenes tend to feel only half-fulfilled, a framing device plot that never manages to stand on its own and kills the momentum of the main action without providing much of its own merit to the story. However, Hedges and the collection of doctors and fellow patients in the rehab clinic perform admirably with what they are given.

In the end, this is drama therapy with a budget, but what results is a beautiful little film. Like many other small movies of 2019 — "The Farewell," "The Last Black Man in San Francisco" and more — it was overlooked by major awards ceremonies. Now it's found its way home, free to Amazon Prime subscribers amidst quarantine. It's the perfect time to follow the chicken's trail and spend some time with "Honey Boy." (4/5)

Related Stories



Classic odyssey comes to the Outer Banks of Carolinas

By [ETHAN RICE](#)



An art show uncovered

By [EMILY PAWLOWSKI](#)



Local filmmakers demonstrate their projects

By [EMILY PAWLOWSKI](#)
